



PREGNANCY, ILLNESS, AND VIOLENCE:
THE POWER DISCOURSES OF MOTHERHOOD IN
MARY MORRISSY'S *MOTHER OF PEARL*

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ABSTRACT

Oster, Rebecca Renae, M.A., Department of English, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, North Dakota State University, April 2011. Pregnancy, Illness, and Violence: The Power Discourses of Motherhood in Mary Morrissy's *Mother of Pearl*. Major Professor: Dr. Miriam Mara.

This paper aims to explore the connection between the power structures of religion and medicine within Mary Morrissy's *Mother of Pearl*. Morrissy's text explores the ways in which women are oppressed by the Irish construct of perfect motherhood, which stems from the internalized social control exemplified in the religious and cultural expectations of women. Morrissy's text points out that a woman's national and individual identity is directly defined by her role as a mother and a religious figure. Morrissy's text critiques this construct and shows it to be unattainable as the power structures create a new form of oppression that continues to mandate the mother construct through bodily control. The connection between these power structures is exemplified through the geographical and political borders of Ireland as well as the physical borders of women's bodies. The medical power structure physically invades women's bodies and leaves them scarred, marked, and dependent on the construct for any identity. Morrissy's text critiques this impossible standard and a culture's tendency to perpetuate the myth of perfect motherhood within the ideological community.

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Morrissy's *Mother of Pearl* represents women who are oppressed by the paragon of perfect motherhood, a construct maintained through religious ideology as well as the power of the cultural discourse surrounding medical issues. Morrissy's text repeatedly shows how women's bodies are controlled through the cultural and religious construct of Irish motherhood as well as the power of the cultural discourse surrounding medical issues, which also aids the construct by intruding on women's bodies, leaving them mentally oppressed and physically scarred. As shown in many other contemporary Irish novels, a woman's role in Irish culture is defined by the religious and cultural expectations that mark her as a maternal figure. Morrissy's novel continues to show the fallacy of this culturally mandated position, but enhances our understanding of the evolution of this oppression by showing how the medical construct has added to the dominant patriarchal influences, creating a new form of oppression that continues to subjugate women into a state of perfect and unattainable motherhood.

Morrissy's novel also aims to show the root of this oppression by connecting the embodied motherhood experiences of three different women. Irene Rivers is marked with shame and isolation as a tuberculosis patient confined to a sanatorium. She later is "cured," marries Stanley Godwin and after failing to conceive, Irene steals a child, Pearl. Irene kidnaps Pearl, later called Mary, from the hospital soon after the child is born, leaving Rita Golden, Mary's biological mother, to wait for the return of her child four years later. The child, Pearl, whose name is also Hazel Mary, Mary, Moll, and Jewel, has no information or accurate recollection of her past history with Irene and suffers from a confused identity as a result, as her multiplicity of names suggests. While the women's stories are told in separate

sections, Morrissy weaves their lives together through their shared experiences as mothers and daughters to show how women from opposing ideological and political regions of the same country have a shared history of a motherhood, an experience that encroaches upon numerous borders: the geographical borders of Ireland, the ideological borders of religion and medicine, and the physical borders of women's bodies.

The novel takes place presumably during the 1950s in Ireland and Northern Ireland, a location where women are silenced by a patriarchal ideology that dominates the culture. Morrissy also emphasizes the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland to show how the influences on a woman's motherhood experiences cross geographical and ideological borders. Like their country, the women are separated by a literal and figurative geographical border, but also like their country, they are connected by the pervasive ideologies that cross physical borders of both the country and the individual.

Morrissy portrays Ireland as a place where women's autonomous identities have long been threatened, a theme which has not been ignored by contemporary Irish literature. Authors such as Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, and Anne Enright have dealt with issues of motherhood repeatedly in their texts, revealing that the ideologies influencing the motherhood construct cause a woman's identity to be confined to her role as mother.

As A. A. Kelly notes, a significant amount of Lavin's short stories are told from a woman's perspective and show the "social conditioning of the female state" in terms of a woman's relationship to her domestic space and relationships with her children or male characters (47). In these stories, women are repeatedly treated as possessions and reproductive figures (52-3). Lavin discusses motherhood at length in the novel *Mary O'Grady* as well as in many short stories such as "Villa Violetta" and "Happiness," where

the mothers, as in other Irish texts, are often portrayed as a self sacrificing, “persistently unselfish” characters (70).

Along with Lavin, the novels of Edna O’Brien often deal with mothers and mother-daughter relationship, from her early work of *The Country Girl’s* trilogy (1960, 1962, and 1964) to the later *The Light of Evening* (2006). Jeanette Shumaker also discusses the complex and unattainable myth of the Madonna in relation to O’Brien’s works, in which women must choose between an attempt to become the virgin mother, a self-sacrificing mother/wife, or fail and become a “fallen woman,” a struggle shown in both works by Lavin and O’Brien (185). For example, Shumaker notes that O’Brien’s short story, “Sister Imelda” shows that both sides of the Madonna construct, the religious virgin and the wife/mother, are equally submissive as they both bow to patriarchal influences, be they of the church or the patriarchy (188). While they tell their stories differently, both authors portray the resulting struggle and guilt that surface in the face of unrealistic ideals. Additionally, in the *Country Girl’s* trilogy, O’Brien rewrites the usual and overused plot in which women find meaning in their lives through marriage and childbirth (452) and, according to Kristine Byron, “dismantles” that myth to retell the Irish story of womanhood (461).

Anne Enright adds to this theme with her novel, *The Gathering*, and her short story collection, *Yesterdays’ Weather*, both of which portray the conflicting roles women must play in accordance with the religious and social expectations placed on women. Jeanette Shumaker notes that numerous short stories such as “The Portable Virgin” and “What are you Like?” show women who try to reconcile the discord between the roles of the matronly

mother figure of the domestic sphere and the figure of the “whore,” who is desirable as a sexual woman, but not as a religious mother construct (108-10).

Mary Morrissy joins the voices of these Irish authors in her own representation of Irish motherhood, a position oppressed by patriarchal ideologies that exist within both the religious and political affiliations of the country. Mary Morrissy’s voice adds a new dimension to this topic by showing how the power construct of medicine has aided this oppression by increasing the power of the patriarchal voice in connection to an Irish ideology that uses motherhood against women.

THE RELIGIOUS POWER STRUCTURE

Mother of Pearl focuses on the internalized social control exemplified in traditional and cultural expectations of women. Morrissey's novel shows an obvious connection between the religious role of women as mothers and the importance of that mother role to the nation. Heather Ingman suggests in *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* that nationalism is automatically a part of an Irish woman's identity. Sexuality has intertwined with nationality as women are to uphold the "purity of the Irish nation" by emulating the Virgin Mary (7). A woman who is not the pure virgin is then "anti-Irish." Similarly, in "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva explains that religious and traditional roles have a tremendous impact on cultural expectations; a woman's identity is defined by motherhood through the link to the Virgin Mary: the "consecrated representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood" (160). To be an Irish woman, then, means that a woman is expected to be a mother to uphold both her religious and national significance.

A woman's religious and national significance is further emphasized through her political role. James M. Cahalan in his "Introduction" to *Double Visions*, adds that "sexism was inscribed directly into the Irish constitution" in which the Catholic Church received a "special status," making divorce illegal, confining women to the domestic sphere, and taking away rights over her body (20). To be an Irish woman means that she is expected to fulfill her mother role, which, in turn, leads to her political, religious, and cultural subjugation. Heather Ingman further notes that after 1992, women's rights were dismissed by placing political restrictions on her ability to act in the public sphere; this was exacerbated by 1932's marriage bar for teachers and the 1935 Conditions of Employment Bill which further limited work for women in their life outside the home (11), and silenced

their “voice” in the public. Gerardine Meaney, an Irish feminist critic, discusses Ireland’s “obsession with the control of women’s bodies by church [and] state,” which results from an anxiety that patriarchal dominance might be in question (7). Meaney also writes that women “are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation, they become the territory over which power is exercised” (10). It seems that Irish women, as symbolic representations of the country, can only gain an identity through the Irish mother construct, a role reinforced through cultural, religious, and political discourse.

However, any identity women might obtain from entering into the mother construct is also controlled directly by the religious and political influences of the country. The lack of political power women have historically faced in Ireland also stems from the Catholic church’s control of that political world and women’s movement within it. Tom Inglis, in *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*, describes religion’s direct role in the social constructions and cultural traditions of how women and their bodies are viewed and treated. The church had a direct role in monitoring how people might, or might not, talk about or engage in sex (143). Inglis notes that historically, the maternal figure was also a figure of religion (68-69). The mother was a moral power of the family, but a power that was controlled only through the church (188). In the middle of the 19th century there was emphasis placed on making women into “good mothers” in order to improve the overall state of Ireland. An emphasis on mothering took place in school, going so far as to encourage the church to “monitor” and “supervise” women in their own homes (198-99). Furthermore, ignorance and shame about sex were encouraged (199); the church held power over sexuality (and still does to some extent, according to Inglis) until an awareness of this issue emerged in the 1960s (164). The mother construct consists of a woman

becoming the faithful, self-sacrificing mother and wife with “an unquestioning readiness to regard the domestic sphere as her natural habitat and engage in reproduction rather than production” (“Origins” 16). With seemingly little other options available, Irish women were confined to the home as wives and mothers, a condition condoned by both the political state and the church, which often, as in the case of Morrissy’s novel, act as one.

By using this cultural influence as a backdrop, Morrissy’s novel offers a glimpse into the lives of three different Irish women and their various experiences with motherhood. The novel begins by defining religion as a pervasive ideology in the women’s lives as religious imagery exists throughout the stories of the three women. First, the title of the novel, *Mother of Pearl*, is a reference to the Virgin Mary, but there are many other references. For example, when Irene goes to the south side of the city to steal Pearl, the innkeeper, a Mrs. Blessed, states: “There’s plenty of room at the Inn” (Morrissy 73), but Irene must follow the inn’s rules, also referred to as “The Ten Commandments” (76). Similarly, Irene, who we could perhaps refer to as Mary at this point because of her desire to be a virgin mother, only escapes with the child because attention is drawn away from her as a Mr. Carpenter (perhaps another nod to the biblical story) accidentally kills himself in the inn. Christ imagery also surrounds Pearl’s rejection of motherhood as she is “reborn,” “swaddled in white sheets” (Morrissy 207). Nor is Rita free from religious references. Rita’s friend thinks she named her baby Mary because it was a “virgin birth” (150). Additionally, after Irene steals the child, Rita walks into a church only to hear the story of Moses being found among the rushes by the Pharaoh’s daughter (Morrissy 176). She also hears the litany “Mother of Pearl,” which describes the Virgin Mary, after which Rita “felt blessed and released” because her child, represented either as Moses or Jesus, has been

found by a “mother of Pearl” (176). Morrissy’s novel appears to be a partial retelling of the biblical Christ story, this time through a woman’s perspective, which depicts the eventual impacts of a transfer of an unattainable religious model onto contemporary Irish society.

These religious constructs pervade a culture that tells women they should inhabit the religious mother role to gain an identity. In “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva explains where this construct originates as women are trapped in representations of the Virgin Mary, which Christian religion refers to as “alone among women” in her holiness, purity, and her ability to link the heavenly world with the earthly (181). In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich adds to Kristeva’s theory by noting that the concept of the suffering, ideal mother goes all the way back to Eve (168). Rich also notes that, historically, “the purpose of [woman’s] existence” was to produce children, to continue the family, and, ultimately, to carry on human existence (159). Add to this Kristeva’s assertion that that the construct of the Virgin Mary is a woman without sin, a virgin even after giving birth, and that she never dies (168), it is clear this construct is a difficult one for women to inhabit and overcome.

While this impossible construct serves to mold an Irish woman’s identity, the text also depicts the political and religious unrest of the Irish nation as a backdrop that helps to construct the mother role. This nation’s ideological volatility is clearly referenced in the text through the emphasis on the geographic border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, a border defined largely by the political and religious unrest that divides the country. The city of Morrissy’s novel, separated by a river border, represents both sides of the country; the river also represents both the geographic and metaphoric border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Rita and Irene are connected through their experiences and anxieties

surrounding their child, Pearl. These mothers are separated by the political borders of Ireland and Northern Ireland and also by the Catholic and Protestant divide; while separated, these women are also closely connected as the culturally mandated role crosses ideological and geographical borders.

While the women's identities as mothers are connected to the border, the river divide works to show how the pervasive ideology affects women on both side of its metaphorical boundaries. Morrissy describes Irene as a "map stretching southwards" (Morrissy 48). She is also "an explorer who, having studied the maps, finds that the terrain corresponds with the cartographers' drawings" (90-1). Irene Rivers is able to cross the borders numerous times; initially from a "port town in the far south" (49), she moves with Stanley Godwin, her husband, to the "north side of the capital" (50). When she crosses the bridge into the south again to steal Pearl, she refers to herself as Mrs. North. Rita Golden lives on the south side of the capital on the other side of the river, which Rita both fears and is unable to cross. Pearl, however, continuously crosses these geographical borders; initially born on the south side, Irene takes her to the north. She returns to the south side once she is returned to Rita, where she is taught to fear the other side. But, years later, she returns to the north and discovers a closer connection to that side of the border. Each woman has a separate experience with the border; Irene uses the border to her advantage to kidnap Pearl, Rita fears it, while Pearl is able to exist on both sides of the border. Linden Peach asserts that Morrissy uses the almost "mythical" environment to separate the real motherhood experience from the *concept of motherhood*; Peach stresses that the location hardly matters as Morrissy is more focused with what kind of ideology the location presents (156). While the political borders certainly matter to the nation, both sides of the border work similarly

on women; it is their response to the ideology that is of interest in Morrissy's novel.

Regardless which political and religious "side" the women are on, or no matter how often they cross over that border, their identity as a woman is always connected to their role as a mother.

Irene has the ability to cross the boundaries because she searches for a way to enter the mother construct, which both ideological "sides" will allow and encourage. Irene desires to be both virginal and a mother, and while Kristeva calls this inability to separate woman from mother a mere "fantasy" (161), it is still a constant issue that surrounds Morrissy's characters. Irene is able to fulfill this mother role for her husband Stanley as she takes the place of his own mother and remains a virgin due to Stanley's impotence. Stanley's obsession with his dead mother dominates Irene's ability to be his wife, showing clearly that Irene is a stand in for his maternal figure: "The tiny house oppressed her because it bore so keenly the traces of Stanley's recent loss" (Morrissy 50). She finds this role confining, especially since she must fill the role of a woman who already existed. They live in what was referred to as "his mother's room" and she "lived out of a suitcase" like a visitor (51). While Irene stands in for Stanley's mother, she has no sexual or emotional relationship with him, which impedes her from being a mother in the eyes of the community. Sinead McDermott presents the connection between the maternal and the home as "products of fantasy and deep psychic investments" which are "invented" rather than occur naturally (268). McDermott notes Irene's separation from her first home; she is expelled from it by her mother because of her illness (270); the hospital becomes her new home until she also leaves in order to create a new maternal space with Stanley. However, in Stanley's home she is also rejected because, though she is a mother figure, she cannot

become a mother. Irene's ability to cross borders is about a search for her home, a home where she can inhabit the maternal construct and create her own identity; however, the only identity available for her is that of a mother.

Irene, since she cannot construct her mother identity, instead uses her virginity as an identity, which is, ironically, the closest she can get to a mother role. As Kristeva asserts, extreme importance is placed upon the Virgin Mary's, and all women's "perpetual virginity" (168), but her true role, the mother, can never be recognized while she is physically a virgin. Irene believes that to be a virgin is her "life's work" (Morrissy 34). Her virginity is not threatened when she performs services for men in the sanatorium by stripping, believing that she is not harming her virginal image because she is "providing" for them (35). It is ironic then, that while Irene remains a virgin, she uses her sexuality to "mother" the men in the sanitarium; both her sexuality and virginity are closely linked to her desired role as a mother. They are contrasting roles that cannot be compromised but are closely linked in the cultural and religious constructs that combines them in this novel.

Morrissy's text also critiques this unattainable role by pointing out how the culture denies women full access to even this culturally mandated identity. Once Irene "gives birth" to Pearl by kidnapping her, her identity as a virgin is torn apart through physical violence. Once Irene fulfills that mother role by acquiring a child, Stanley rapes her, ostensibly because Irene tells Stanley the child is another man's. Stanley, who no longer sees Irene as the pure woman who inhabits the role of his own mother, punishes her sexually for no longer being the Virgin mother. Irene, who desires to be both mother and virgin like the pure construct of motherhood that is inflicted upon her, can never attain that ultimate goal. In one action Stanley 'consummates' their marriage for the first time, takes

away Irene's virginity through his rape, and names her "whore" (Morrissy 99), ensuring that now that she is a mother, she cannot be a pure virgin. Morrissy's text offers a critique of this unattainable construct, showing how even if a woman desires to become a mother (and essentially play by the culture's rules), the culture will not allow a woman to attain the construct fully because it might give her the power of an identity. Irene, who almost does inhabit this construct, first by remaining a virgin and then by stealing a child, is an example of how the culture maintains its power over women as they constantly struggle to attain an identity of motherhood, the only identity available.

Rita is also pressured by the social construct of motherhood, though in a different way than Irene. Her anxiety about motherhood stems from a surprise pregnancy, rather than a desire for a child. Rita is held to the notion that she is, as Kristeva puts it, a "maternal receptacle" (170) and that her job is to be a mother who automatically loves and instinctually cares for her child. Because Rita is scared by this idea, she fears that she is an unfit mother. While Rita feels anxiety about fulfilling a mother role, the anxiety caused by the loss of her child is much worse because she blames herself for Pearls' kidnapping, thinking "some woman had wanted her more" (Morrissy 160). Rita's anxiety about not being able to mother along with Irene's strong desire and inability to produce a child cause their identities to be overtaken by their mothering experiences, even as they yearn for the construct to form an identity for them.

This construct that shadows Irene and Rita's identities is derived from the myth of the maternal, which Ann Owens Weeks discusses in reference to Morrissy's novel. The myth involves women who devote themselves entirely to raising their children, are the sole nurturer, and who are punished duly if they fail to meet the standard of the ultimate holy

being. Weekes admits the myth is “almost universal” but as she notes, has a special place in Irish nationalism (136). She affirms that because Rita exists in a society where fear or insecurity about the apparently innate ability to mother children is repressed, she cannot see the reality; she exists only within the confines of the lie that women should just be able to raise a child without being taught how to do so (Weekes 143). Rita feels like an unfit mother because she is confined to the position of the passive mother and is unable to help her sick baby: “There was nothing [Rita] could do but watch helplessly as the little creature...labored and struggled behind glass.....Rita refused to hold her. The baby was too weak. Just looking at her hurt Rita” (147). She refuses to even hold the child because the division between them is so pronounced. As Inglis explains, the focus on the idealization of motherhood transformed the outward social control into an internalized concept (“Origins” 17). What was originally a cultural and ideological pressure has become part of Rita’s consciousness, which leaves Rita feeling inadequate both as a mother and a woman. She believes that simply because her baby is sick, her mothering skills appear equally as weak. Since she could not appropriately nurture a better child, she must be a poor mother and, consequently, a defective woman.

Morrissy also shows how the construct of motherhood is passed down from generation to generation; even Pearl thinks Rita is not a good nurturer and imagines “a different kind of mother” (Morrissy 239). Part of the division between mother and child occurs when Pearl recognizes that she is not a complete part of Rita’s family, but is not told why (230); Rita does not inform Pearl that she lived with another family for four years. For Rita, the memory causes shame as it offers an example of poor mothering and is also an apparent punishment for not loving her child enough. Pearl senses something is wrong,

but like her mothers, attributes it to the downfall of women: her mother and herself. She catches glimpses of her life with Irene and Stanley; however, that life is a fantasy as well, a fantasy in which a mother is caring, nurturing, watchful, and perfect in Pearl's eyes.

Though she does not remember her life with Irene and Stanley, Pearl seems to feel more of a connection to Irene than Rita because she, too, is part of the community that views the mother figure as a perfect construct, one that is entirely unattainable.

Pearl is thus separated from her history and both of her mothers, which leaves her searching for a history of motherhood, hoping that even a fantasy of her history will give her some answers to her own identity. Like her mothers then, she searches for the perfect mother construct to remake her own identity. The images of her first mother, Irene, only come to her through Jewel, the fantasy who takes on many roles as her twin, her sister, even later herself, and her child. Ironically, the only glimpse Pearl gets of her old life, a history that would perhaps give her an identity, is during the eclipse, when the sun is shadowed. She glimpses Stanley, but even then, she cannot see Irene (Morrissy 246), as Irene's identity has been too covered by the impossible construct of motherhood. Pearl cannot see a woman, only the shadow of what she imagines her mother to be. The "shadow [that begins] on Irene Rivers' lung" (9) also covers Rita's identity through her insecurities about mothering. This shadow, like it has covered her mothers, also covers Pearl's identity. This shadow keeps her from seeing a clear depiction of her own identity and from seeing her mothers for who they are. Even in the eclipse that gives her a glimpse into her old life, she can still only see the father figure that she yearns for, not her mother(s).

Pearl's connection to her mothers' shadowed identities is also portrayed through her connection to the religious and cultural roles that oppress Irene and Rita. As with her

mothers, religious imagery surrounds Pearl's story. Even as an adult woman at the end of the novel, Morriissy relates Pearl to Moses, who, as a child, was left in the rushes: the river carrying her "away to the other side and into the arms of Pharaoh's daughter" (Morriissy 235). When Pearl goes to the other side of the city, the north appears familiar even though she has not been there since she was taken from Irene: "The street names leaped out at me—Babylon, Macedonia, Jericho---like a ruined and cryptic version of home" (266). Morriissy connects her childhood memories with biblical references again to show the ingrained religious importance as well as Pearl's connection to the religious construct of motherhood.

Like Irene, Pearl's continuous search for home results in her ability to cross the geographic borders of the city as she searches for her own identity. Morriissy shows Pearl's numerous connections to the north, a side of the city to which she did not know she belonged. Pearl imagines Jewel, the ghost of her former life with Irene, living "in a small, dark house on the other side of the city" (Morriissy 235). Her connection to the other side of the city is also repeated through Jeff, her husband, who is from "the other side of the city" (260) and is shot during the upheaval between the north and south. The north represents a side of the city she continuously reaches for as it also represents her lost life with Irene and, consequently, her own lost history. Though Pearl cannot remember her specifically, Irene still becomes an idealized version of a mother who wants her, as she believes Rita does not. Pearl's search for identity by crossing geographical borders shows the desire to reconcile her lost identity to the lost and unattainable mothering she desires.

Irene is not afraid of the river because it represents merely a water boundary that she must cross to enter another side of the same ideology that wants her to be a mother, as she

does. Even her name “Rivers,” depicts her ability to cross the boundary that divides the rest of Ireland because she is willing to enter the construct that the nation upholds. Rita is afraid of the river and imagines it holding “the body of a baby” (182); she feels guilt about losing Pearl and about ignoring and hiding those lost four years in order to maintain an ideal about her own home. McDermott questions “authentic motherhood” as well as its connection to “authentic home” (264). The connection between idealized home as well as the idealized woman as the center of that home is deconstructed as a role as divided as the country, but that role still pervades the country. Irene goes to the south to steal Pearl and reclaim her lost home in order to reclaim her lost motherhood experience. Ignoring Pearl’s lost history and fearing the north allows Rita to ignore the “evidence” that she did not mother her daughter for those years and allowed her to be taken.

While Pearl feels more at home on the north side, she is unable to connect her life on the south with the fleeting images of her life on the north: “The landmarks of my childhood are all gone now as if the very city were trying to forget itself” (Morrissey 229). Unlike Irene, Pearl has no map to carry her beyond the boundary; she is not associated with maps or directions and has no reason to fear the north as Rita does. As McDermott suggests, Pearl’s relation to two different homes suggests that this notion of home is not necessarily static and “a given” (268). Her home with Rita has not taught her how to become a mother herself, but glimpses of her life with Irene still perpetuate her idealization of this mother construct, even as she sees and learns Rita’s fears. While motherhood has previously been an issue thought to be restricted to the home, the Irish culture’s fascination with making mothering a public issue shows how this history of motherhood can be passed down with or without a static home or a maternal figure. Morrissey shows how the history of motherhood

is a shared and inescapable history; Pearl's identity is connected to both sides of this border, to both motherhood experiences, just as she is connected to the cultural and religious power that makes up this motherhood role.

THE MEDICAL POWER STRUCTURE

The Irish cultural ideology surrounding motherhood crosses geographical and ideological borders, but Morrissy's novel also highlights how the power of the cultural discourses surrounding medical issues crosses the borders of women's bodies. The first sentence of the novel, "It had started as a shadow on Irene's lung" (Morrissy 9), suggests that the shadow which lies on Irene's identity, and that of the other women in the text, is a shadow brought on by the effects of the mother construct. The "shadow" on Irene's lung represents her illness, tuberculosis, but it also represents her connection to motherhood as it indicates that she is infertile and unable to become a mother.

While Irene's desire to fulfill this role is connected to the religious constructs imbedded within Irish culture, Morrissy also shows how the medical construct aids this oppression. As Foucault suggests, sexuality is further controlled by creating a discourse of power that represses individuality. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault discusses the influence of the social body, which emphasizes its power over individuals (55), as that social body defines what is normal or abnormal, acceptable or unacceptable (61). Irene's desire to be a mother is considered normal in the culture and is encouraged. Foucault explains that the system of power is maintained through the merging "personages, institutions, forms of knowledge" that maintain the power. Medicine is the "common denominator" that links various power structures and allows people to be "classified...as insane, criminal, or sick" (62). As long as Irene desires to be a mother, she is "classified" as a normal woman, but when Irene fails to produce a child, she is considered abnormal. Rita similarly, who wants to be a good mother, worries that if anyone should find out that she lacks natural nurturing abilities, she will be classified as abnormal.

The influence of the discourse about medical issues has links to the power structure of religious and cultural ideologies; all these constructs have the power to influence the power structures that surround familial relationships, particularly women's role within that family. In the *History of Sexuality* Foucault's discussion of the family cell, which came to the fore in the 18th century, exists on the binaries of man and woman in order "to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support" (108). Additionally, the medical field started to "regula[te]" sex by defining what was acceptable (25). Sex became an issue shared between the individual and public, the discourse used to control both individual sexuality and keep it within the accepted public discourse (26-7), similar to the way the Catholic church has historically controlled and regulated sexuality within the Irish family. Moreover, Foucault notes that sex is also a "medicalizable object" that has to be studied and treated medicinally (44), and that methods of bodily and sexual repression result from the struggle for power in the public discourses about sexual binaries (83). The women of the novel must exist within the borders of these binaries, so that the other geographic, ideological, and physical borders of the novel come to represent the borders of the sexual and familial roles in which they are placed.

Also, like the religious influences that seek to control sexuality and a woman's role in that society, the cultural discourses surrounding medical issues similarly seeks to other women's bodies when they do not meet the predefined standards. Irene's social role is defined by her ability to produce a child, and her inability to do so signifies that she is unable to fulfill this role. Irene's illness is both blamed for her inability to conceive and associated with promiscuity, an equally punishable offense in the community. Her mother, Ellen Rivers, fears that Irene contaminated the family; as a result, Irene is displaced and

disowned by them. Because of her sickness, she has “shamed them” (Morrissy 10). When Irene is sent to the sanatorium, her father is told that “circumstances had forced her departure.” She had to “go away,” insinuating an unwanted pregnancy (12). In Irene’s case, sickness and pregnancy are linked as they both have associations with shame for her family and community. Foucault argues that women’s bodies are particularly easily dismissed through science because a woman’s social role as a woman and a mother is “saturated with sexuality” (104). If there is something “wrong” with Irene’s body, her sexuality is immediately questioned.

Morrissy also points out the irony and double standard associated with how the cultural discourse about medical issues others women’s bodies. Because Irene’s body has already been othered and her sexual purity questioned, her illness is also perceived as a punishment for the supposed transgression of her sexuality. Irene has disgraced her family through her illness and is given up for dead; she recognizes that their rejection of her is a “punishment” (Morrissy 33) for her physical humiliation. Irene is penalized for the “sexual transgressions” that leave her unable to fulfill a mother role; but, ironically, women are also supposed to become mothers, according to Adrienne Rich, to accept the punishment of giving birth that was handed down from God since the time of Eve (128). Childbirth has associations with illness and weakness (Rich 162-3) as well as with shame because it suggests that women to be punished (136). But yet, without this punishment, women are nothing. Rich continues to suggest that having children and suffering through childbearing is “the purpose of [a woman’s] existence.” Childbirth and illness are sacrifices women give to abate their punishments for being women. Childbirth is considered an illness, but so is not being able to produce a child. By any standard, women are expected to inhabit

unattainable constructs that are held up as normal via the fusing of the medical power structure's influence on national and religious discourses. Peach also notes Morrissy's irony on this subject: Irene is abject as an infertile woman, despite the fact that the physical effects of pregnancy, perceived as a form of illness, are also considered abject (158). Especially disconcerting about this paradox is that Irene does not seem to oppose the reasons her sexuality is questioned or question why she deserves punishment; instead, she seeks to work with the system and do the only thing that could possibly reverse her impure identity as a childless woman: gain a child and a new identity.

Irene is an example of a woman who seeks to enter the ideology of a place by regaining her social space within the cultural body. In "Female Embodiment and Clinical Practice," Maureen Connolly cites Drew Leder's discussion of the cultural body, which is othered after it reveals its "dysfunction" within the society that makes the lived body part of the "status quo" (181). Bodies who stand out from this culturally lived body must be silenced, othered, ignored. Connolly points out that the power of the medical field results in the increasing control of the body, which, in turn, to "perpetuat[es] a power differential based in the assumption that medical knowledge is privileged and mysterious" (181). As Connolly states: "bodies are the problem, medicine is the solution" (181). The body is an object, one that can be made to mirror the cultural modes that tell it how to act, move, live, reproduce. Morrissy points out how the cultural discourse about medical issues works to increase its own power structure by decreasing the power of the female body. When a woman's body does not act as the culture predicts, then it is othered and its objectification separates it farther from the individual. In *Mother of Pearl*, all three women feel the societal pressure that comes from inhabiting or refusing to inhabit the mother construct.

While religion certainly surrounds all the motherhood experiences of the women, Morrissy shows how the cultural discourse about medical issues influences this construct in order to critique the motherhood construct that Ireland emphasizes.

The oppression of the power of the medical institution is also perpetuated by the community, a community which represents the Irish nation's expectations on women's ability to reproduce. While both Stanley and Irene are expected to become parents, Morrissy reinforces the idea that a woman's ability to produce children is vital to her perceived identity through the connection repeatedly drawn between Irene's health and her ability to conceive. Just as Irene is rejected by her family for her connection to promiscuity through her illness, she is also ostracized in her community for 'the problem' with her sexuality once she marries Stanley and *fails* to conceive. Irene entertains constant inquiries about her "health" from the community (Morrissy 55) and because she does not fulfill her full role in the community and her family, she cannot be a part of them. Irene's health becomes synonymous with her ability to conceive; if she cannot produce children, then she is sick. Stanley states, "You belong with the healthy and strong" (49) when he takes her from the sanatorium; however, once she fails at fulfilling her physical mother role because of *his* impotence, *she* is constructed as ill. Irene's response to this is to create an imaginary pregnancy, which Stanley believes and rejoices in, to stop the community from judging her as unfit. Stanley, while well aware that Irene could not be pregnant with his child, believes it for much the same reason that Irene invents the story: they are happy to be fulfilling the role expected of them by the community and the larger culture.

In the eyes of the community, Irene's illness has made it impossible for her to produce a child and connect to her expected mother role. Irene was already portrayed as

unfit in the sanitarium, where illness also suggests a bodily inadequacy that can be equated with the unacceptable body of a woman who is not physically 'pure' or virginal. Similarly, if a woman cannot conceive, or perhaps may not wish to, then her body must also be to blame. The stigma associated with Irene's tuberculosis is announced to the community through Stanley's betrayal; her infertility and her illness are linked through the shame they both convey. Stanley, after being duped, willingly blames Irene: "It's the TB, you see, it's left a weakness" (Morrissy 64). Adrienne Rich asserts the frequency of assuming the woman is "barren" rather than acknowledging the possibility of a man being incapable of producing a child (119). Rich also notes the assumption that women should be the producer of life; they are both "caged" in their maternal role and are also the objects of suspicion and blame (127). Rita, unable to be the ultimate nurturer and protector, and Irene, apparently not even capable of producing a child, are marked as incomplete women, unable to fulfill their expected mother role.

As with Irene, cultural discourse surrounding medical issues also controls Rita when her pregnancy is equated with illness. She considers her marriage to Mel and her pregnancy a "nightmarish aberration, the product of feverish illness" (Morrissy 154). During her pregnancy Rita is "huge and distended, bloated to the size of two," and afflicted with morning sickness (125). Even after the birth of the baby, Rita's father treats her as if she's sick (154). Rita's natural bodily experience is associated with abnormal physical weakness. Paula A. Treichler also suggests that in the medical field, childbirth is considered a "diseased condition that routinely requires the arts of medicine to overcome the process of nature" (119). There is an idea that medicalization of childbirth makes it "safe" (117) whereas before medical intervention, it was dangerous. Women's bodies, whether

producing or not producing, seem to be portrayed as abject, and Morrissy's text works to critique the medical construct's subjugation of women's bodies by perpetuating this myth.

Morrissy also deconstructs this myth of female bodily weakness by drawing repeated attention to the scars or marks that medical procedures leave on women's bodies. Morrissy shows how medical issues intrude on women's bodies through physical marks, marks that identify how the physical borders of their bodies have been breached by the construct of the cultural discourse about medical issues. After (the disease of) pregnancy, Rita feels further sullied by the cesarean section. She believes that Pearl was ripped out of her "as if she were not a fit person" (Morrissy 143). The medical professionals distance Rita from her daughter at numerous levels as she is kept behind the glass of the nursery and separated further by being in the incubator, under constant supervision from those same medical professionals (146). Rita forms no connection to her baby as she is kept at an arm's length from her. Susan Bordo asserts that increases in medical technology allow the medical world an increasingly closer relationship to the unborn child, often at the risk of alienating the mother (86). Rita hopes to make her identity through giving birth to her child, but in the end feels that she is less effectual than the doctors and their medical equipment. The identity she hoped to attain from her pregnancy is thus denied to her.

The cultural discourse about medical issues similarly connects to the religious construct that confines Rita, who similarly defines her identity as a mother around the "sacrifice" she made of her body. Rita is proud of her cesarean scar because it enables her to play the part of a mother. She "feel[s] like a fraud," an inadequate mother, and accepts that she will be judged as such by her baby's sickly appearance; as a result she would rather show the "long gash on her stomach" to visitors than the baby (Morrissy 148)." All focus is on how she

should be feeling as a proud and confident mother; no acknowledgment is given to the fear and anxiety that she actually does feel. Rita's cesarean section scar defines her status as a mother because it represents her fulfilled mother role and gives evidence that she has sacrificed her own body for her child. Rita willingly accepts this sacrifice because she is ashamed that she does not feel the "motherly" instinct she believes is inherent in all women.

Irene develops a similar fascination with the scar from her tuberculosis surgery after they "lose" Pearl to the imaginary miscarriage that Irene and Stanley must perpetuate in order to explain away the feigned pregnancy. Irene's scar comes to symbolize her connection to motherhood, just as Rita's does: "[Irene] would trace the route of the scar, fading though it now was, as surely as if she were sightless and reading Braille" (Morrissy 71). Irene carries the physical representation of her unfulfilled mother role. She would always undress in the dark so as not to expose the "red seam on her flesh" (56) that marks her as unable to become a mother. For Irene, the scar of her surgery perpetuates the assumption that she is ill; the scar exists as a physical representation of her infertility. Irene desires to be physically marked by her husband, "to have blue mottled marks on her thighs, love bites on her neck. A black eye, even" (61) in a desire to replace the marks of tuberculosis with the marks of sex, or at the very least, physical contact. As the scar symbolizes her childless fate, she wants a different kind of physical mark on her body – even the marks of physical abuse- because she believes it would symbolize her body's ability to become pregnant. She hides her scar because it represents her as impure, which is also an "illness." Because she is already viewed as impure, she can no longer adequately fulfill the virgin mother construct and so she desires this physical violence to represent sex,

which would suggest that she is capable of becoming a mother, of asserting her role and overcoming the stigma of an interfile woman. Her illness and her ability to conceive still appear inseparable, and she wishes the physical marks of sex to cross out the scars of her illness; she desires to change the physical representation of her infertility into an ability to be a mother.

Similarly, the cultural discourse about medical issues also aids in the construction of Irene's identity as ill and impure, which only increases its power over her identity. Irene is oppressed not only by the sentiments associated with her illness, but also by the medical procedures that leave her with no bodily privacy. She is violated not only by the stigma of tuberculosis, but also by the machines that "rend[er] her transparent" (9). X-rays provide further visual evidence of her childless identity. The medical examinations and procedures leave her with no bodily privacy: "She had already been seen through, down to the marrow of her bones" (Morrissey 34). Charlie Piper, the man who initially convinced Irene to strip for him, keeps her X-rays as a keepsake. For him as well, her illness defines who she is. Her identity is stripped down to just her body. Just as the medical procedures have taught her, Irene's identity is congruent with her bodily integrity. When Irene shows her body to Charlie, it is the same as showing him the private secret of her illness that represents who she is: "He remembered the evening when she had stripped for him; it was as if she had be showing him this – he held the X-rays in his hand – her cloudy and mysterious interior" (110). The first sentence of the novel also references Irene's obscured identity: "there was a shadow not only on Irene's lung, but on her life, too" (9-10). The medical procedures also aid in increasing the shadow over her identity by making her culturally unable to reproduce. The surgery leaves her feeling as bodily interfered with, as a woman who has

been physically abused. This connection is further increased by the rape of Irene's mother on a table just before a description of Irene's surgical procedure, similarly on a table (Morrissey 14). The medical intrusions leave an "identifying mark" (71), a mark that defines her identity as an infertile and impure woman, a stigma she is powerless to erase.

The discourse about medical issues exerts this power by merging with the discourses of Ireland's religious ideology; in order to exert power over women, it must engage in defining women by their mother status. In this way, the construct further exerts its power over Irene's body by both taking away her ability to mother and by giving it back. Irene views the institution as a place of power. As Anne Owens Weekes notes, Irene treats Dr. Clemens like a god; he is "her prayer" (Morrissey 14). The power of this medical construct, personified in Dr. Clemens, who was the one who actually gave her the surgical scar and obscured her identity as a mother, becomes the new religion through which Irene will remake herself (Weeks 139). Similarly, when Irene wants a child, she returns to the institution, a hospital, to steal a baby. Her life is continuously influenced by this medical construct as it "cures" her illness, names her infertile, and gives her a child.

The cultural discourse about medical issues continues to take the place of the dominant religious and cultural ideology (playing god to Irene), by offering her a chance to remake her identity; unfortunately, this identity is still controlled by the medical power structure and by the religious and ideological constructs. Additionally, Irene's scar, which first identifies her as a woman incapable of being a mother, becomes a scar that represents her newfound motherhood. Her surgery scar begins to transform in her mind as "another slashing of skin, a new wound" as she knows that her child would be born by cesarean because, "no man had ever entered her; how could a baby come out? It would have to be

torn from her, yanked out as her shattered ribs had been” (Morriissy 71). In her mind, the intrusion of the medical construct has allowed a new ability to foster the child for whom she sacrificed her ribs: enabling “the fruit of Eve’s ribs” to give her the child she thinks she deserves (72). She fantasizes that her ribs were ground down and milk was added to make a “plaster-cast infant” (72). Irene feels that her ribs can make another human being, just like Adam’s ribs: “This was her offspring, hers alone, the child of her illness, Irene’s first loss” (72). The child is a reward for the sacrifice of losing her ribs, she feels that she deserves to enter this construct so she can return to a society she has been distanced from since she was diagnosed with tuberculosis.

Both Irene and Rita internalize that their role as a mother has taken over their role as an autonomous woman, and the religious, cultural, and medical discourse aids the construction of this fallacy. Rita faces her identity crisis once she becomes pregnant and marries Mel. She experiences rough sex with Mel and finds herself bruised: “She had expected remorse. But he was proud. Proud that he had marked her” (Morriissy 130). Similar to the medical intrusions on Irene’s body, Mel’s physical abuse identifies Rita as under his control. Once she is both pregnant and tied to him through marriage, “She no longer knew herself, a married woman, a mother-to-be” (132). Morriissy compares this loss of identity to the death of the self: “For a brief time Rita Golden had lived and then she’d been killed off by getting what she had always wanted” (132). This loss of identity is the result of power structures’ influences on women’s bodies, which results in a shared cultural motherhood identity.

A SHARED HISTORY OF MOTHERHOOD

Morrissy portrays Pearl's connections to the motherhood experiences of Irene and Rita to show how the history of motherhood is handed down through the culture. Like Rita, Pearl feels a strong opposition to the experience of motherhood, which seems to stem from her childhood experiences. Pearl calls childhood a "debilitating illness" (Morrissy 250) because of her experiences with her mother and her own fractured identity. Once the cultural discourse of the medical construct has shared its oppression with Rita and Irene, its power is automatically handed down to Pearl through her mothers. Pearl similarly connects the medical construct with motherhood as she recounts her own birth: she "had to be cut out, forcibly removed, a bloodied stump lifted out of her like a part that didn't work, an appendix, a spare rib" (Morrissy 227). She is also marked physically, much like her mothers are with their scars, by the identifying birthmark on her face that eventually brings her back to her birth mother (201). Pearl shares a history of mothering with both of her mothers; as a result, she is similarly marked and controlled by the medical construct that seeks to identify and control her through the mother construct.

Morrissy uses Pearl's character to critique the effects of this shared history of the mother construct first by pointing out Pearl's fractured identity through her creation of Jewel. Jewel works as her imaginary friend, her imagined sister in the north, and even as herself and the child she later aborts. Pearl fantasizes about Jewel, her "neglected twin," being taken care of by a mother who understands and cares for her. This mother figure understands and loves her child because she is "a recurrence of her old illness. Clogged lungs, a congested chest, a croupy cough" (242-3). References to tuberculosis clearly link Jewel, the image of herself on the north side of the city, with Irene. Pearl imagines

drowning with Jewel, and Jewel's mother pulling her out "breath[ing] new life into her" (244). Pearl is "drowned," just as Irene thought she would be by tuberculosis (276). Pearl clearly connects more with the ideal mother she has created of Irene more than with her biological mother. She assumes that this ideal mother construct can understand the "illness" of her own fractured identity.

Perhaps in another search for her lost identity and lost mothering, Pearl works in a hospital, just as Irene worked in a medical institution. Pearl enjoys "their scale, their vastness, the urgent sense of vital business going on. Life and death at the same time" (257). Rita has always hated hospitals because they represent her source of shame as the place where her child was stolen, which even further distances Rita from Pearl's search for identity. Rita is shocked at Pearl's decision to willingly work within the institution that, for Rita, signifies her own fractured identity as an unfit mother.

Pearl's relationship with Jeff, her husband, also has a strong connection to the medical construct. She initially meets Jeff as a nurse in the hospital, and when she has sex with Jeff in the hospital, memories of her own conception invade (Morrissey 259). Her very identity is completely focused around the power structure of the institution and how that power structure makes up her identity; links to the beginning of her life exist not while thinking of a mother (a role Rita cannot fill) but of the institution that gave her an ideal mother, Irene. Full of residual guilt and fear of mothering, Pearl aborts their baby and begins to see Jeff as "the man in the white coat, all reasonableness and calm, who steps across the bloody threshold and tries to restore order" (273-274). He becomes part of the medical world, a doctor or someone who is distanced from the possibility of human error and sexuality, who replaces that with the strict regime of medical power. He, like the

cultural discourse of the medical construct, has come to control her, to restrict and return her back to the mother construct, a role she both unrealistically idolizes and inherently fears.

No matter how hard she tries, Pearl cannot escape the “sickness” of her mothers’ oppression because of the way the ideology is emphasized both by religious and medical power structures. Inglis asserts that the Irish concept of self-sacrificing, controlled sexuality was passed down from mother to daughter so that they would have “the same notions of self-denial and self-sacrifice into which they had been acculturated” (“Origins” 18). Similarly, Anne Owens Weekes, in her analysis of Morrissy’s text, points out how the mother characters hand down their “overwhelming guilt....as well as their fantasies and uncertainties regarding their own desires” as they learn the “lesson of female inferiority” (139). The women are expected to fulfill an impossible construct, but are given no indication of how to do so from the culture.

This mode of oppression, then, is handed down through the religious ideology and solidified through the power structure related to medical issues. Additionally, Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* emphasizes that a woman’s ability to “mother” a child stems largely from how psychologically prepared she is, which is directly related to how they were raised; how children are nurtured thus may also influence how willing they are to enter into the parent role. Chodorow suggests that society places women in roles, preparing them mentally and psychologically from childhood. A woman is taught by a culture from birth to become a woman who is prepared for mothering (39).

Morrissy’s link between Pearl, Rita, and Irene is solidified as they are all unmothered in some way. Rita describes herself as a “motherless girl” with “no history”

(Morrissy 132). Additionally, Rita's mother is hardly mentioned and Rita's mother-in-law seems to offer no helpful mothering teaching except to remark on the inadequacy of Rita's breasts as she attempts to feed her baby (Morrissy 148). Pearl is kidnapped, taken from her birth mother and taken again from her kidnapper, replaced in a home with a mother who does not particularly want to be a mother. Irene is disowned by her family and her attempts to remake a new one completely fail. The three women offer a glimpse into the construct of motherhood and how this cultural teaching of motherhood is especially damaging to a woman's ability to form an identity separate from the power structure of her nation.

Pearl's abortion is an attempt to free herself from this cultural mandate. While Pearl asserts that she is a "tabula rasa" after her abortion (Morrissy 275), she is still oppressed by the cultural roles and power that confined her mothers. Heather Ingman uses Kristeva's notion that pregnancy creates a link between mother and daughter to argue that Pearl aborts her own child in the end of the novel because she cannot be a mother as she is "unmothered herself" (176). She has no real mother, no real sense of who she is, and no real home to provide her with an identity. McDermott suggests that Morrissy's novel is a feminist critique of the notion of home as the place of the idealized maternal figure. She further argues that Pearl aborts her baby because she is already a mother, or a "carer," for Jewel (277). In a way this is true, as Jewel, while she exists in Pearl's mind as a separate child, is really just her own vision of herself. Jewel, herself, becomes the child who "rose from the ashes of the north city," she imagines her in "an institution" (271), she is a child of the mother she imagines, but Jewel also becomes her child once she realizes that like Rita, she cannot fulfill the mother construct and that Irene is just a fantasy. Pearl has no solid identity; unable to recognize that the child who requires care is really herself, Pearl

acknowledges that she cannot live up to the ideal mother role while caring for herself and aborts her child.

Once she aborts the fetus, she is “liberated from the shackles of a child that never was” (Morrissy 275). But, she is haunted by the memory of the child that she views as a shadow of herself. While rejecting the lives of her mothers, she still refers to her abortion as a “crime;” (207) suggesting that even though she has freed herself somewhat from the construct, she is not separated from the judgment of the community or the internalization of that power structure.

CONCLUSION

Morrissy's novel critiques the power constructs that influence Irish motherhood. While other novels by Irish authors have dealt with the construct of motherhood and the oppression of women in the culture, Morrissy's novel addresses the confines of the mother construct in a new way. While the religious influences have historically been a major factor in creating the construct, Morrissy's novel seeks to further critique a nation that allows the power structures of medicine to combine with the nation's religious ideology in an effort to further oppress women.

In *Mother of Pearl*, the cultural discourse surrounding medical issues merges with the religious ideology that defines motherhood in Irish culture. If women are ill, the power of the medical construct will cure them; if they are pregnant, they are deemed ill and need to be cured; if they are infertile, they are also ill and in need of a cure (and potentially pregnancy). Morrissy draws attention to this impossible standard and the culture's tendency to perpetuate the myth of perfect and unattainable motherhood within the ideological community.

When Pearl rejects her motherhood experience, she is a "tabula rasa," perhaps finally free of the culturally mandated mother role that seeks to cover her identity and define who she is. However, Pearl still remains the "vessel of guilt" derived from her mothers' experiences; she is the "shadow on the X-ray that speaks of death;" she acknowledges that Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden is also "[her] banishment;" (Morrissy 276). Her identity is still controlled by the power of the religious and medical constructs that oppressed Rita and Irene. Morrissy cannot offer a clear solution to this issue. A woman (like Irene) may want children, rejoice in pregnancy, and perhaps even willingly enter into

an identity construct, but in Morrissy's text, women, as Irene does (280-2), end up back in the institution that named them incomplete women for failing to inhabit the construct, waiting for her a chance to become a mother again; waiting for an identity.

Morrissy critiques a culture where a woman must automatically conform to the national expectations to gain acceptance. She also critiques a culture that does not allow women to reject a cultural ideology without being "punished," or her body "sacrificed" for acting outside of the cultural body and the religious and scientific expectations of that body. Morrissy does add a unique perspective to this issue of the sacrificial mother: the text seems to suggest that the construct of motherhood should be acknowledged and deconstructed so that women can gain an individual identity in their motherhood experiences and not be controlled by power structures. Morrissy's novel offers a critique of this cultural imperative, telling women to step out of the shadow and away from the x-ray that seeks to hide her identity behind a country's ideology.

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